

CASTE WALL: GOVERNANCE

10-foot 'caste wall' comes down, fragile peace holds in a Tamil Nadu village

A 200-foot-long, 10-foot-high concrete wall, widely described as a "wall of untouchability," was recently demolished in Muthulapatti village in the Karur district of Tamil Nadu. The structure, which stood for nearly three weeks before its removal on August 9, 2025, physically segregated the residential areas of two communities, bringing to the forefront the deep-seated issues of caste discrimination, social exclusion, and administrative challenges in rural India.

The "Caste Wall" Incident in Muthulapatti

1. Background of the Incident

1. Location: Muthulapatti village, Karur district, Tamil Nadu.
2. The Structure: A formidable concrete wall measuring 200 feet in length and 10 feet in height.
3. Purpose of Segregation: The wall separated the residential areas of the Thottia Naickers, an intermediate caste, and the Arunthathiyars, a Scheduled Caste community.
4. Timeline: The wall was constructed and remained in place for approximately three weeks before being demolished by district authorities on August 9, 2025.
5. Core Trigger: The conflict was sparked by a long-standing dispute over the Arunthathiyar community's access to shared public facilities and their claims of facing persistent discrimination.

2. Communities Involved: A Study in Social Hierarchy

Thottia Naickers (The Dominant Community)

Social Status

They are classified as an intermediate caste with a history as warriors and local chieftains.

Political and Economic Power

This community is politically influential and holds significant power in the local structures of western and central Tamil Nadu. They often control land, resources, and local governance, giving them a dominant position in the village hierarchy.

Arunthathiyars (The Marginalized Community)

Social Status

They belong to the Scheduled Caste category and have historically been placed at the very bottom of the traditional caste hierarchy.

Socio-Economic Condition

The community is socially and economically marginalized, having faced generations of systemic discrimination, segregation, and exclusion. They have been consistently denied access to public spaces, common resources, and equal participation in village life.

3. Nature and Impact of the Wall

The wall was more than a physical barrier; it was a powerful symbol of social division.

Justification by the Builders

Those who constructed the wall claimed it was a necessary barrier to prevent "outsiders" from engaging in nuisance activities such as loitering and public drinking. This was presented as a law-and-order measure.

Reality for the Affected Community

For the Arunthathiyars, the structure was unequivocally a "wall of untouchability." They viewed it as a blatant attempt at physical segregation, designed to deny them their fundamental right to access public pathways and facilities.

Tangible Impact

It restricted the free movement of the Arunthathiyar community, forcing them to take longer, inconvenient routes. It exacerbated pre-existing caste tensions, making the social divide stark and visible. It served as a powerful symbol of inequality, denying the Arunthathiyars a sense of belonging and equal citizenship within their own village.

4. Legal and Administrative Context

Illegal Construction

The wall was built on *poramboke* land, which is public land owned by the government. Its construction was therefore an act of illegal encroachment.

Violation of Regulations

The builders had not obtained any government permission or building plan approvals, making the structure illegal from its inception.

Administrative Action

1. Initial protests were led by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front, which condemned the wall.
2. Several official meetings between the communities, mediated by authorities, failed to yield a resolution, indicating the rigidity of the dominant caste's position.
3. On August 7, 2025, the district administration issued a formal eviction notice, citing the illegal encroachment on public property.
4. On August 9, 2025, a large contingent of police and revenue officials, equipped with heavy machinery, demolished the wall under tight security.

5. Constitutional & Legal Dimensions

The construction of the wall was a direct violation of the foundational principles of the Indian Constitution and several key laws.

Violation of Fundamental Rights

1. Article 14 (Equality Before Law): The wall institutionalized discrimination and inequality.
2. Article 15(2) (Prohibition of Discrimination): It directly violated the constitutional guarantee against discrimination in access to public spaces, roads, and facilities.
3. Article 17 (Abolition of Untouchability): The wall was a modern, physical manifestation of untouchability, an act explicitly abolished and criminalized by the Constitution.
4. Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty): It infringed upon the right to live with dignity and the right to free movement.

Violation of Statutory Provisions

1. Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955: This act criminalizes the enforcement of any disability arising from the practice of "untouchability."
2. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989: The act specifically addresses intentional acts of humiliation and social exclusion against SC/ST members.

Neglect of Directive Principles

Article 46: This incident represents a failure of the state's directive to promote the interests of SC/STs and protect them from "social injustice and all forms of exploitation."

6. Broader Socio-Political Analysis

This incident is a microcosm of larger, systemic issues prevalent across rural India.

Pervasiveness of Caste Segregation

This is not an isolated case. Similar "caste walls" and other forms of physical barriers exist in many parts of India, reflecting a form of "spatial apartheid" where Dalit hamlets are deliberately kept separate from the main village.

Local Power Imbalance

The incident highlights how locally powerful intermediate castes can exercise immense control over land, resources, and institutions. The economic dependence of marginalized castes on these groups for labor and livelihoods often renders them vulnerable and silences their dissent.

Cultural and Ritual Exclusion

The dispute was not just about physical access but also about symbolic inclusion. The Arunthathiyars' requests to participate in common village cultural events had been repeatedly denied, further entrenching social hierarchies.

7. Governance Challenges and Policy Recommendations

The incident offers critical lessons for governance and social policy.

Proactive Enforcement and Prevention

1. Recommendation: State authorities must intervene swiftly and decisively at the first sign of such caste-based physical barriers to prevent conflicts from escalating.
2. Recommendation: A mandatory annual social audit of all public spaces in villages should be conducted to ensure they remain inclusive and accessible to all communities.

Awareness and Education

Recommendation includes Grassroots social reform campaigns focusing on constitutional values of equality and fraternity should be conducted through schools, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and gram panchayats.

Empowering Marginalized Castes

1. Recommendation: District-level SC/ST grievance redressal mechanisms must be strengthened and made more accessible and responsive.
2. Recommendation: Actively promote the representation and participation of Dalits in local governance bodies to ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

Strengthening Judicial Precedent

Recommendation: Courts should fast-track hearings related to physical segregation and untouchability. Imposing exemplary costs and stringent penalties on violators can serve as a powerful deterrent against future transgressions.

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